

How Grace Sustains a Troubled Relationship

“So, spread love everywhere you go—first of all in your home. Give love to your children, to your wife or husband, to a next-door neighbor.” —Mother Teresa

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” —Ephesians 4:32

The **couple** sat next to each other, miles apart. She wanted to work on it. He said he did too. So over the next several weeks, we did our best to walk through the **problems**.

Each had a laundry list of complaints. She did this, this, this and this. He did this, this, this and this. I listened carefully to each of them, and I tried to teach them to listen to each other. We practiced reflective listening, and we talked through the steps of **conflict resolution**.

My approach was based on the words of a mentor counselor, “It is never about the laundry lists. It is always about the communication.”

Eventually, they told me things had improved. I was glad but unsure. To me, there was still something missing, particularly for him. They had learned the *how* of **communication**, but they lacked a change of heart.

Not knowing how else to help them, I agreed they had come far enough and secretly hoped it was true. I didn’t see either of them for a couple of years—until I sat behind him at a social engagement. He was sitting with his new girlfriend.

All **relationships** are difficult. Whenever you put two flawed people together, it won’t take long until you get a list of complaints: *They are selfish. They are irresponsible. They are*

proud. And these complaints pull us apart, threatening to destroy the relationship.

But God made us to be connected to one another, so what are we to do? “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him’” (Gen. 2:18). “If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no-one to help him up!” (Eccl. 4:10). For the longest time I believed that my mentor was right and that the most important thing in good relationships was the communication.

But now, after years of **ministry** (and **marriage**), I see it differently. Communication is not the most important thing in good relationships. It is the second most important thing. The *most* important thing is **grace**.

Imperfect people will, by definition, let us down. They will fail us, hurt us and annoy us. And don’t count on them changing. As Rich Mullins once said, “My friends aren’t the way I wish they were; they are just the way they are.”

Every relationship you have, from your spouse to your neighbor, requires grace. And the more important the relationship, the more grace you will need to give—for the more deeply you know someone, the more deeply flawed you will discover them to be.

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus commanded. In other words, give your relationships a spoonful or two of loving-kindness. But how exactly do we do that? I believe gracing your relationships requires changing two law-based attitudes that lay deep within our hearts: justice and judgment.

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